

## **Elijah Parish Lovejoy: Defender of Freedom**

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Elijah P. Lovejoy was a staunch supporter of not only the abolitionist cause but also freedom of the press. He did not allow the strong words and actions of others to change his mind or stop him from printing his beliefs in his newspaper. These unpopular actions eventually led to his murder at the hands of an angry mob.

Elijah Parish Lovejoy, known as the “martyr abolitionist,” was born on November 9, 1802, in Albion, Maine. He was born to a Presbyterian clergyman, and both of his parents were of old New England stock. As a college graduate he emigrated to St. Louis, Missouri, where he taught school and edited the Whig newspaper. He also wanted to become a preacher like his father, so he returned east to attend the seminary at Princeton in 1832. He got his license to preach in April 1833 from the Philadelphia Presbytery.

He received requests from friends in St. Louis to return and begin the publication of a religious newspaper in 1833. Elijah and his friends invested \$1,200 for the purchase of supplies. Elijah was elected editor and was given full control of the business. Lovejoy expressed his gratitude and promised to edit the paper in the interest of the church only. He could not keep that promise and week after week his abolitionist views kept creeping into the column of the *St. Louis Observer*. The first issue of the *St. Louis Observer* was published on November 22, 1833. His editorials and the sermons he preached in church angered many people. In June 1834, Lovejoy wrote an editorial opposing slavery. On April 16, 1835, another article appeared in the *St. Louis Observer* on slavery. He discussed how Christians allying themselves with those who support slavery was a great

wrong. “As I have before stated many times, and as I here repeat, I am opposed to slavery; believing it to be a great moral, and of course, political evil, a sin and a curse to any community where it exists.” In an editorial that he wrote on November 5, 1835, he criticized the Roman Catholics, and it caused him further disrespect.

As he matured, he became more critical and outspoken about slavery. “Our creed is that slavery is a sin—theretofore, hereafter, and forever—a sin. Consequently it follows that whoever has participated, or does now participate, in that sin, ought to repent without a moments delay.” Threats of violence forced him to move to Alton, Illinois in 1836. Lovejoy believed he had a right to publish his anti-slavery views, saying that he would not yield to angry mobs opposed to his rights of freedom of speech and of the press. In late July 1836, Lovejoy ordered his press to be moved to Alton. Sometime that night, while on the wharf, it was destroyed and dumped into the river by a group of anti-abolitionists. They told Lovejoy to leave Alton. He refused, insisting that freedom of speech and of the press were guaranteed to him by the Constitution.

Lovejoy proposed an anti-slavery society on July 6, 1837. He wrote defiantly, “These mobs will cease as soon as some of the mobites are hung up by the neck, and not before. . . . Mercy no less than Justice calls for a summary execution of some of the wretches as an example to the rest.” Lovejoy also angered people when he said that the Depression of 1837 might be God’s way of punishing the people of Alton.

That November he had ordered a new press, and upon its arrival the townspeople became uneasy. Lovejoy and his friends stood guard over the press when violence suddenly broke out. Many shots were fired and in minutes many people were dead, including Lovejoy himself.

Elijah Parish Lovejoy was shot and killed defending his printing press against a mob that tried setting fire to the warehouse where it was stored. A bell rang from the church as a warning, hoping to enlist aid to the defenders. Before his death, the mob hurled paving stones, breaking every window in the building. Elijah and the other defenders threw earthenware down onto the attackers. The rioters brought ladders and burning torches to toss onto the roof. Elijah P. Lovejoy was shot five times while he was trying to push away one of the ladders. No one was ever convicted of his murder.

Lovejoy's conviction that slavery was wrong and a sin and his insistence on freedom of the press earned him a place of honor in the history of journalism. It was not until after the Civil War that slavery was abolished. But many people with no direct involvement with the slave controversy came to the defense of Lovejoy's rights of freedom of speech and of the press. On November 8, 1897, the citizens of Illinois dedicated the Lovejoy monument in Alton to honor Elijah Parish Lovejoy. The monument is 90 feet tall and has two stones at the entrance telling his story. [From Lois A. Carrier, *Illinois Crossroads of a Continent*; Merton L. Dillon, *Elijah P. Lovejoy Abolitionist Editor*; Dumas Malone, *Dictionary of American Biography American Council of Learned Societies*, vol. 6; Bill Nunes, *Southern Illinois An Illustrated History*; George W. Smith, *History of Illinois and Her People*, vol. 2; and William C. Winter, *The Civil War in St. Louis A Guided Tour*.]